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THE RIGHT OF PROPERTY IN MAN

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4265, 192

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

SUNDAY JULY 3 1859

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C. Sherman & Son, Printers,

Philadelphia.

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DISCOURSE

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FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

SUNDAY JULY 3 1859

BY

W. H. FURNESS

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PHILADELPHIA

C. SHERMAN & SON, PRINTERS

CORNER SEVENTH AND CHERRY STREETS

1859

1899

[illegible]



Family of  
William Lloyd Garrison  
July 8, 1899.



# DISCOURSE

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ISAIAH V. 7.

HE LOOKED FOR JUDGMENT BUT BEHOLD OPPRESSION, FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS  
BUT BEHOLD A CRY!

TO-MORROW is the Anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence. It will be observed as a holiday by a general suspension of business, by public addresses and festivities, and by a profuse discharge of artillery. And nothing would be more natural than to infer from these demonstrations that the people of the United States have a high appreciation of the great truth embodied in that celebrated Declaration as the essential principle of our national existence. That the American people have a passionate love of Liberty, and recognize the Rights of Humanity in the whole breadth of their application, we should conclude from the regard paid to the Anniversary which is at hand.

There are certain facts, however, standing out in glaring contrast with our renowned Declaration, facts which show that in the general mind there is an alarming absence of respect for the great principles, to the maintenance of which our fathers pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honors, and which we all profess at this season to honor.

Eighty-three years ago, this then infant nation published before the whole world its solemn Declaration of the Rights of Man, and in support of it poured out its blood and treasure for eight long years. But now, strong and great, it is standing in its pride upon the sacred principle of natural Liberty, treading it in the dust in the persons of four millions of slaves, whom, by the appointed organ of its Justice, it strips of all rights and leaves to be disposed of according to its own sovereign will and arbitrary pleasure. And it scorns the idea that there either has been or can be any Higher Law than this.

In accordance with this declared doctrine, standing out side by side with the Declaration of Independence, and claiming far more active homage than that, for that is boldly sneered at as an abstraction and generality by some, and disregarded by all, we have now the right of property in human flesh affirmed to be as sacred as any right, and demanding equal protection with all other rights.

That such pretensions are seriously urged without being instantly met by an overwhelming expression of public ridicule and indignation, shows that we are losing all sense of the first and most vital distinctions, and that the simplest principles require to be anew demonstrated and enforced. I pray you, friends, give me for a few moments your patient and earnest attention.

THE RIGHT OF PROPERTY IN MAN.—Putting the gross iniquity of this claim out of sight, to say nothing of its rank barbarism, what can be more palpable than its absurdity? Can there be any such thing as a right of property to anything whatsoever, save upon the ground of every man's inalienable right to himself? Here is the beginning and the basis of all rights of property. If a man do not belong to himself, if his hands and his feet, and the various organs and faculties of his being are not his, if his property in these things may be sequestered, when he has done nothing to forfeit them except being born of a certain complexion, and that was no act of his, then there is nothing else, neither houses, nor lands, nor implements of toil, nor beasts of burden, to which he can assert the shadow of a right. For if there is no such thing as a natural and inalienable right to one's own limbs, there can be no claim to anything which the exertion of



those limbs produces. How, then, can one man hold property in another when he does not own himself? Thus the assertion of such a claim involves a flat denial of it; and it only shows into what depths of absurdity men plunge when they give up Right and make Power law.

Deny the right of every man to himself, and there are no such things as natural rights, which governments and legislatures are under the slightest obligation to respect. The hard won earnings of the day-laborer may be taken from him at the close of every day to the very last cent, or the accumulated wealth of the rich may be appropriated summarily by any one who is strong enough to take it, and no wrong is done, no right infringed, in either case.

To assert, therefore, the right of man to hold property in another man, in other words, that one man's right to himself may be appropriated by another, so that the latter may lay claim to him just as he lays claim to a horse or an ox,—the assertion of such a right of property is destructive of all rights of property. It annihilates the very idea of property. It is the very central principle and soul of disorganization and anarchy. It exterminates human society. For it enthrones Brute Strength as absolute lord of the world. Recognizing no basis of things but arbitrary power, it degrades men to beasts of prey.

That I do not exaggerate, that I am uttering no ultra doctrine, no fanatical delusion, but only what is so plainly true that it is a shame that it should need to be stated, when I say that the claim to hold property in man destroys the very idea of right, and leaves no foundation for the holding of any property whatsoever, human or other, is evident from the fact that it is expressly asserted that slaves possess nothing, and slaveholders act upon the assertion; and this monstrous doctrine of savage power is actually carried out in what are styled, in bitter mockery, courts of justice. There have been cases, as you know, in which slaveholders, having made an agreement with their slaves that they should purchase themselves for a certain sum, and having received nearly the whole amount of the hardly earned purchase-money, have sold the slaves and kept the money as their own, claiming it as the proceeds of their property. And there was no redress for this monstrous wrong, as a slave cannot own anything nor make a contract. We are shocked at the indescribable baseness of such proceedings. But they are the necessary consequences of the essential principle of American Slavery, the right of property in man. They illustrate that; and they show that in fact as well as in principle the claim to hold man as property, involving as it does the denial of the indefeasible right of every man to himself, is subversive of all rights of property, of all

rights whatsoever, of the very idea of justice. And let it be admitted, and the word justice, with whatever words there are that partake in the remotest degree of its meaning, may as well be erased from human language at once.

How it conflicts with other rights as well as the rights of property, with the right of Free Speech, for example, you all know; for the conflict between the two has been going on for years directly before our eyes; we are in the midst of it, and it is yet far from being ended. In the Southern States, this sacred right of Free Speech, once gloried in as an essential distinction of our form of society, is prostrate in the dust, and can be used only at the instant peril of life. And throughout the North, the exercise of it incurs the loss of popular favor and personal success. It is denounced as treason, or sneered at as fanaticism. Mobs have been gathered again and again to silence free discussion with fire and blood. Men high in office, of the best culture the country affords, well versed in history, familiar with the principles and philosophy of things, have proposed, in order to protect the right of property in man against free thought, the enactment of laws abridging the right of Free Speech. In one instance, the attempt to establish a free press in a Free State cost the individual who made the attempt his life. The Rev. Mr. Lovejoy, the brother of the present noble



member of Congress from Illinois, for the sake of protecting human property, was shot down as an outlaw.

But not only does the claim of property in man wage a war of extermination against the freedom of the Press and the Pulpit, it cannot be forgotten how the right of Petition, the right of the most abject slave that breathes to kneel to the proudest despot on earth and supplicate for mercy and justice, was sought to be struck down in the halls of Congress, because it threatened the security of property in slaves. Do you not remember, and remember with pride and joy, how nobly the attempt was met and resisted by one who had been clothed with the highest official dignity which this people can bestow, and yet all whose official honors faded away in the effulgence of the glory that irradiated him in that great battle?

But there are nearer and dearer rights even than the rights of Petition and Free Speech, if any rights can be dearer than these,—there are rights most holy, if there is anything holy on earth or in heaven, which the claim of property in human flesh tends utterly to destroy, and which this monstrous claim has already put in such jeopardy, that they can be exercised only under penalty of fine and imprisonment. The right to give food and shelter to a fellow-being fleeing for what is dearer than life, personal liberty, this right, the exercise of which Religion and Humanity enjoin as a most

sacred and imperative duty, which no man can neglect without violating the law of God, and doing deadly harm to his own soul,—this right the claim to hold man as property not only denies, it has actually and deliberately, with all the forms of human law, in defiance of Almighty God and the universal conscience of mankind, converted into a penal offence; so that, at this very time, in one of the so-called Free States of this Union, numbers have been prosecuted and imprisoned for obeying the plain dictates of common humanity, for discharging the first duty of true Christian men, the duty which, being left undone, not only renders all pretensions to the Christian name worthless and contemptible, it divests a man of his personal honor and ruins him soul and body.

Thus this unhallowed claim, of which I speak, makes good evil and light darkness. Its nature is to render the performance of indispensable human duties impossible. And it has actually made itself effective to such an extent, that it has seared the conscience of the great Christian Church, and so blinded the understandings of most eminent professors of religion, that they cannot distinguish the piercing shrieks of human agony from the dull creaking of dead political machinery, but stand unmoved and dumb when a hunted mother murders her child to save it from being treated as a chattel and a brute! To the most vital intents and purposes, the

alleged right to hold human property expunges from the Bible the plainest precepts of God, and its self-evident truths from the Declaration of Independence, thrusting itself in the place of both, usurping the authority of the Highest, and virtually declaring the fundamental principles of our Institutions to be, the right of one man to enslave another, and the Fugitive Slave Law, by which that right is acknowledged and secured.

Thus, my friends, it is apparent, not only in reason, but in fact, that the claim of property in man is destructive of all claims, of all rights. It annihilates the ground upon which you hold anything that you call your own, your wife, your child, your right hand, your own soul.

I have long ago ceased to be surprised at the general insensibility to this claim, considered on the score of its iniquity and inhumanity. The wide-spread selfishness that renders us regardless of the rights of others in so many other respects, accounts for our insensibility in this respect.

But, putting all considerations of humanity and religion out of view, what I am surprised at is, that, in this age of the world, and in this country of all countries, when and where the pursuit of gain has sharpened men's minds to an exceeding keenness, and rendered them in no direction so quick to take alarm as in re-



gard to whatever threatens the security of the rights of property, those rights for the protection of which such a complicated and costly fabric of laws is erected that it is the study of a life to master its intricacies,—in this condition of things, it is, I say, a matter of supreme astonishment that men, business men, men engaged in accumulating property and in constantly seeking securities for it, the descendants, too, of men who started up revolutionists the instant the hand of government was thrust into their pockets to take a few pence from them,—that this class of persons should be so blind as not to perceive how this pretended right of property in man, by denying the inalienable right of every man to himself, strikes at the root of all rights of property, rendering all property insecure,—this, this is indeed a wonder. It shows that if Trade makes men sharp, it makes them so narrow likewise that they can discern nothing outside their shops and counting-rooms. For, as I have said, if your own hands are not your own, what is there that those hands can fashion or hold to which you can urge any claim against any one strong enough to take it from you? Evident as this is, in the very reason of things, to any one who can put two ideas together, it is made visible to our eyes, palpable to our very touch, in facts, in events, public and notorious, transpiring every day in the presence of this generation. So that the noonday

sun is not plainer in the heavens than the disorganizing, ruinous nature, of this pretended right of holding property in human beings. Fatal is it to every hope of security for property, for personal liberty, and for life itself.

Although so many significant indications point the other way, notwithstanding the appalling insensibility of the Church, and the general indifference of the people of the Free States, I cannot bring myself to give up the belief that the time will soon come when the truth, which I seek to impress upon you, and which no words that I can command can adequately represent, will break, with the clearness of a mathematical demonstration and the force of a thunderbolt, upon the hardest minds; that we shall all feel, just as we feel an earthquake, with fear and great trembling, that the essential principle of the Slave Power,—the right of property in man,—is as fatal as an earthquake to all security, and will crumble the foundations of public order and private prosperity into ashes. A truth so momentous, and so close to us, so close to our reason and our eyes, cannot be forever hidden from the general mind. It cannot be hidden much longer. It must soon be seen by all men that the very sentiment, respect for the rights of property, so confidently appealed to to protect property in human flesh, is the very sentiment, which, though we fear not God nor regard

man, should alone suffice to induce us to withdraw all protection from it, to abolish it utterly; for the right which it assumes is simply this—liberty to violate all rights.

The générality of us, I know, are content to live from hand to mouth, ready to persuade ourselves, with ostrich-like stupidity, that all danger vanishes the instant we shut our eyes to it, satisfied with the miserable hope that things will last out our time, saying, with the selfish old diplomatist, “After us, the deluge.” But when the roar of the rising waters is thundering louder and louder in our ears, as one safeguard after another gives way, when the very spray of the coming waters is dashed in our faces, we shall open our eyes perforce, and there will come an end to this most pitiable folly. And when that time shall come, when the truth in this matter shall break upon men’s minds, then, as quick as the thunder follows the flash, we shall be in the midst of a revolution, and there will be no false and whining conservatism that will be able to make itself heard in the uproar of that crisis. There will be no pause to save the Union, for there will not be one lingering desire to save it, when it is once clearly seen how it protects this most wicked and mischievous fallacy, the right of property in man. Out of the disorder and disunion of that occasion, there will come a reorganizing of our National Institutions. And the



old Revolution, which the Declaration of Independence inaugurated, will be eclipsed—dwindling away into a mere preliminary skirmish—by the grander Revolution, which is either to extinguish forever, in the Northern States at least, the claim, as absurd as it is impious, to hold man as property, or to blot out the sun in heaven, and cover the whole land with a deeper darkness of Despotism than the world has yet witnessed.

There is one powerful cause of the general insensibility to the dangerous nature of this assumed right which must not be overlooked; and that is, that at present this right, although asserted in general terms, has reference only to certain classes, and all that is as yet meant by it is that white men may rightly hold black men as property. This limitation, so far from lessening the iniquity of the claim, only aggravates it. Instead of standing upon the only ground that belongs to it, the ground of brute force, it insults the sacred idea of Immutable Justice by pretending that the Creator has doomed men to be slaves for the color which He has given them. And besides, this distinction is not observed in fact, for there are black men who hold human property, and many men and women whiter than many of the white race, who are held as property. The essential meaning of the claim is that the strong may make merchandise of the weak.

And it is not only even more iniquitous, under this

restriction to the African race, it is not any the less deadly. It does not lose one jot of the fatal character with which it threatens the security of all rights and of all persons. Let it once be expressly embodied in our National and State Constitutions that the whites may hold the blacks as slaves, that a man's right to himself shall depend upon his complexion,—let Power be permitted to make this arbitrary distinction, and what other distinctions are there which it will hesitate to make the moment it has the temptation and the opportunity? What other distinctions are there more arbitrary than this, and on that account less likely to be made? Let Power and not Right be acknowledged as law, on a point so vital as this, and there is no limit to the usurpations which it will perpetrate, there are no claims that it will listen to but its own. Already the slightest infusion of African blood, though imperceptible to the eye, is held to be fatal to the demand for liberty on the part of the slave. From enslaving black men, when once expressly sanctioned as the supreme law of the land, how easy would be the transition, for instance, to an enactment that every one, whether black or white, who should dare to call in question the authority of the law, shall be summarily dragged to the auction block to be sold for a term of years or for life, accordingly as the offence may be committed in private conversation or in a public assembly!

My friends, you think this impossible. Does it appear one whit more incredible than the revival of the Slave-trade appeared a few years ago? And that is now boldly contended for and actually begun. There is nothing impossible in the way of wrong-doing to the despot when he considers himself under the necessity of upholding his own authority. The penalty of free speech now at the South is instant death at the hands of a mob. Let the Slave Power dictate its law to the whole country, and it will take credit to itself for humanity in changing the penalty for that offence from death to slavery for life.

At all events, we cannot be too suspicious of absolute power, especially when we observe how wickedness and oppression, the instant they are enacted and receive the name and sanction of law, cease to be wicked and oppressive in the eyes of the many. Let the grossest iniquity, through a conspiracy of bold, bad men, only be framed into a law, and it is at once transfigured into an angel of light, freshly descended from heaven. Thus it is that the conscience of a whole great nation may be paralyzed, and so be prepared to offer itself up, body and soul, on the bloody altar of Despotie Power.

No, friends, it cannot be. There can be no security for any rights, or for any class of persons, so long as any compromise is acquiesced in with this perilous right which is claimed, to hold as property any description of

human beings. It is full of wrong, and danger, and death. It renders every thought of Justice and Freedom and Religion and Progress impossible. And when these things are departing from men's minds, then all the streams of public order and personal honor and security, though they may still for a while roll full and broad over the land, are drying up at the source.

To claim, therefore, for this devastating principle liberty to extend itself at will, unchecked, over the West, is to demand not merely that the black race shall be held in bondage by the white, but that all rights may be unsettled, that a war of extermination may be waged against whatever makes life a blessing, that men may have leave to plunder and lay waste, and to push on with the utmost vigor the work of turning our cities into howling wildernesses, and of displacing human beings with the bear and the wolf.

And yet such a demand is now actually made, and by men and parties, holding themselves competent to administer the affairs of a free people! And the actually existing government of the country is in nothing so sensitive and so earnest as in standing guard over this deadly right of property in man. And as if nothing were to be wanting to show how the sacred principles of the Declaration of Independence are utterly dying out in men's minds, an effort is to be made, deliberately and without shame, to remove from the



accursed trade in human beings the brand of piracy which our fathers stamped upon it.

If, by a sudden visitation of God, we were all to be brought to-morrow morning to see the condition of things as it is, and how false we are, not only to our fathers, and to their solemn Declaration, but to man and God, instead of welcoming the day with thunders of artillery and tokens of rejoicing, there would rise all over the land the wailing of a stricken and repentant people, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. Instead of proudly flaunting our national ensign in the sun, we should let its bloody and dishonored folds trail in the dust; we should hang all our streets in black, in confession of our great transgression of the law of Liberty and Righteousness.

Insensible as we actually are to the guilt and peril we incur, through our acquiescence in the right of property in man, what moral blindness, what a want of clear perceptions of the simplest truths is disclosed! Everything like a generous and self-sacrificing enthusiasm for a great principle we can no longer sympathize with. It is ridiculed as sheer fanaticism. And our Christianity has become a dead shell, when there is no commanding sense of justice, no respect for equal rights, no humanity, remaining in our hearts. In this state of things, what words can convey any idea of the responsibility resting upon the teachers of Religion? If

they keep silence much longer, all faith in Religion, all respect for it will die out utterly in the general mind.

Profound is my conviction that, had we been loyal to the great Idea which the Declaration of Independence embodies, had we made haste to realize it to its utmost extent, as certainly as that there would not now be a single slave within our borders, so there is not a government in the old world, from England to Turkey, that would not have been, I might almost say revolutionized, within the eighty years that have elapsed since the Declaration of Independence was made. I cannot believe that the masses of Europe could have been kept under the feet of their masters, or driven, as they are to battle-fields, like sheep to the shambles, if they had had before their eyes the stirring spectacle of a vast and growing multitude of men, living here in the new world without one slave among them, in the full recognition and enjoyment of the God-given rights of humanity. Before the overwhelming demonstration of self-government, here presented, it is impossible that kings and rulers could have withheld from the people the constitutional safeguards of personal liberty which would have been demanded. Long ere this the sceptre would have passed away from the bloody grasp of Despotism forever. Even as it is, what throngs of the poor and oppressed of European

lands have poured across the ocean to us! And how did the first blush of the morning of liberty as it seemed to be, that was dawning here, stir the people of France with the wildest enthusiasm!

But, in fact, how stands it this day with the old world? When we remember how, until within the last ten years, Europe was glowing all over with aspirations for Freedom, breaking out, like electric flashes, in Italy, in France, in Austria even, how we waited for tidings of coming revolutions, for the great war of opinion, which an enlightened British statesman had predicted,—when we recall all these tokens and expectations, and then consider what we now behold, the aspect of the old world is gloomy indeed. Except in a few ardent minds, and these are accounted visionaries, the very idea of Free Institutions seems to have deceased. The people appear to have reconciled themselves to be the property of their masters, as the only condition of public order and human existence. What a funeral pall rests upon France, stifling all the aspirations of that ardent and excitable nation! A horrible war is now raging, and thousands of homes are filled with mourning for husbands, lovers, sons and brothers, miserably slain in battle. And what is it all for? Some dim dream of Italian deliverance floats over the smoke of that torment. But really the bloody struggle is only for power and a change of masters. No inspiring hope

for Humanity marshals those hosts and atones for the agony.

Now when I think how, within the last twenty years, the eyes of the whole world have been drawn to us, to our wonderful increase in territory, in population, and in power, and how we have been striving and fighting during this period to extend the area of the most abject bondage the world ever saw, and promulgating laws for the security of human property, the highest officials and our most eminent public men taking the lead in upholding Slavery; when I call to mind the savage outrage perpetrated, for his devotion to freedom, upon a noble Senator on the most conspicuous spot in the land, in the public chamber of the Senate; when I remember, too, the wrongs committed and the blood spilt in the far West for the sake of maintaining the right to enslave men; and when, in addition to all these things, we bring to mind how the cruelty, and wrong, and agony of Slavery have been published throughout the world in the thrilling Story of the Poor Slave translated into all the languages of Europe,—how can I help believing, as I do, that it is *we*, who, by our giant treason to the liberties of the human race, have plucked out of the crushed and bleeding heart of the Old World all faith in the possibility of any freer order of things than now exists!

Believing this, I hold that whatever of hope still



remains for the world's liberty and progress depends upon *us*. Here in America the fate of Europe is to be decided. Here the faith of mankind in human nature is to be vindicated or blasted forever. The struggling nations of the Old World have a far deeper interest in the conflict between Freedom and Slavery on our soil than either we or they have in the bloody war which is raging there. Friends and brethren, never since the world began had a people more solemn inducements than we have to stand up unflinchingly for God and the Right.

For our present insensibility God forgive us! We are sinning greatly against our brothers. May we be awakened one and all to the world-wide wrong that we are doing! That we may have eyes to see our duty, that our hearts may be touched with sacred pity for the Slave, and through him be brought into sympathy and fellowship with the Highest in life and death, let us pray with a fervor passing the power of words!

































































